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2-Year colleges can win over adjuncts with benefits, study suggests

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A new study of community-college faculty members suggests that offering adjuncts benefits like dental insurance does a lot to keep them showing up to work with a smile.

Adjunct faculty members who receive dental, health, disability, or life insurance are not only more likely to feel satisfied with their benefits packages—as would be expected—but they are also substantially more likely to feel satisfied with their salaries than are other adjuncts earning the same amount, the study found.

Paul D. Umbach, an associate professor of higher education at North Carolina State University, and Ryan Wells, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, conducted the study by analyzing data on 5,800 faculty members at 293 two-year colleges gathered as part of the U.S. Education Department's 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty.

In "Understanding the Individual and Institutional Factors That Affect Part-Time Community College Faculty Satisfaction," a paper discussing their findings, the two researchers provide plenty of evidence of job dissatisfaction among adjuncts, who account for more than two-thirds of all faculty members at the nation's community colleges.

Compared with full-time faculty members at the institutions Mr. Umbach and Mr. Wells studied, adjuncts were about 7 percentage points less likely to be satisfied with their salaries, 14 percentage points less likely to be satisfied with their benefits, and 9 percentage points less likely to be satisfied with their jobs over all. They were about 8 percentage points less likely to say yes to the question: "If you had to do it all over again, would you still choose an academic career?"

Moreover, the researchers found, the working conditions of adjuncts appeared to have some bearing on the attitudes of full-time faculty members at community colleges. For a given campus, the larger the proportion of the faculty that was made up of adjuncts, the less likely it was for either its adjunct or full-time faculty members to express satisfaction with their benefits or to say they would choose the same career again. And full-time faculty members on the roughly one-third of campuses that offer full or partial benefits to their adjuncts were more likely than full-timers elsewhere to express satisfaction with their own benefits and pay.

Mr. Umbach said in an interview Wednesday that the apparent link between job-satisfaction levels for full-timers and adjuncts may simply be a reflection of how some community colleges are more supportive of faculty members in general. On campuses where adjuncts account for an especially large share of the faculty, full-timers may feel their job status is more tenuous. On campuses that offer benefits to their adjuncts, full-timers may be more likely to feel that they too are treated well.

Although some adjuncts perceive full-time faculty members as unsympathetic to their concerns about working conditions, the study found that full-timers were neither more nor less likely than adjuncts to say adjuncts on their campuses were treated fairly.

Having union representation also appeared linked to faculty satisfaction. Regardless of whether they are adjunct or full-time, faculty members who work on campuses where adjuncts are unionized are more likely than their peers elsewhere to be satisfied with contractual elements of their jobs.

According to the paper, the researchers also found:

- Community-college faculty members who have a Ph.D. are less likely than their peers with a bachelor's degree or less to report overall job satisfaction, satisfaction with their salaries, or satisfaction with their benefits.
- The more student credit hours faculty members teach, the less likely they are to be satisfied with their jobs.
- All else being equal, part-time faculty members who worked at suburban colleges were less satisfied with contractual elements of their jobs than were those who worked at rural colleges.

The authors, noting that other studies have shown that about half of all adjunct faculty members actually prefer to be working part-time, said they could see the need for additional research showing how much the job satisfaction of such faculty members is a function of whether their adjunct status is voluntary or involuntary.